Final Report of the MLA Committee on Lifelong Learning

Helping adults return to learning to improve their employment potential and realize their career goals

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Alberta
LEARNING

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1. Chair's Message

Alberta's knowledge-based economy depends on innovative, well-educated, skilled and adaptable people who are able to respond to an ever-changing society. To take advantage of the opportunities in this economy and society, Albertans recognize the value in identifying and pursuing lifelong learning opportunities.

Lifelong learning is about acquiring and applying knowledge and skills throughout life to help reach employment goals, enjoy a high quality of life, and be active and responsible citizens.

This report concludes consultations held with Albertans on ways to help adults return to learning to improve their employment potential and realize their career goals.

During the consultations, over 450 Albertans shared their ideas for improving opportunities to return to learning. It was recognized that Alberta already has a strong learning system that offers adults accessible, affordable, flexible and responsive learning opportunities. However, consultation participants noted that more efforts are needed in some areas to encourage more adults to return to learning.

I am pleased to submit the final report and recommendations of the MLA Committee on Lifelong Learning. The Committee has identified some areas for consideration and action that build on the strength of Alberta's learning system.

The Committee reaffirms the Government of Alberta's commitment to building a globally recognized lifelong learning culture and community in Alberta. Learners, parents, instructors, volunteers, learning providers, business, industry, government, and community and professional organizations all share in the important task of building this lifelong learning culture and community.

On behalf of the MLA Committee, I would like to thank the many Community Adult Learning Councils that were instrumental in bringing together the stakeholders and other Albertans in their communities to meet with the MLA Committee. I would also like to thank all those who participated in the consultations, whether in person or in writing. Through your input, we will continue to improve opportunities for adults to return to learning, and help all Albertans understand the importance of lifelong learning.

Wayne Cao
Chair
MLA Committee on Lifelong Learning

2. Executive Summary

This report is the result of consultations on lifelong learning that began in 1999. At that time, the MLA Committee on Lifelong Learning was asked by the Minister of Learning to consult with Albertans to make recommendations on ways to help adults return to learning to improve their employment potential and realize their career goals.

The Committee consulted across the province and received input from over 450 Albertans in 14 rural and urban communities. The input received from the consultation process has guided the development of the Committee's recommendations.

The consultations confirmed that Alberta has a strong learning system that offers a variety of learning opportunities to Albertans. However, to encourage adults to return to learning, enhancement of these opportunities is needed. The Committee's recommendations include, among others, increasing opportunities for learning, providing more supports for literacy and English as a Second Language, and encouraging employers to support lifelong learning. Building a lifelong learning culture and community is a key recommendation.

3. Overview of the MLA Committee on Lifelong Learning

The Committee

In June 1999, the Honourable Ralph Klein established the MLA Committee on Lifelong Learning. Mr. Wayne Cao, MLA, Calgary-Fort, was appointed as the Committee's Chair. Mr. Cao was joined by Mr. Butch Fischer, MLA, Wainwright, and Mr. Gary Severtson, former MLA, Innisfail-Sylvan Lake. Mr. Hector Goudreau, MLA, Dunvegan, now replaces Mr. Gary Severtson.

The MLA Committee was asked by the Minister of Learning, the Honourable Dr. Lyle Oberg, to consult with key stakeholders to make recommendations on ways to help adults return to learning to improve their employment potential and realize their career goals.

The Consultations

The MLA Committee held consultations in rural and urban communities including Fort McMurray, Peace River, Wetaskiwin, Provost, Red Deer, Lloydminster, Edmonton, Athabasca, Edson, Medicine Hat, Grande Prairie, Hanna, Calgary and Lethbridge.

To consult as broadly as possible, the MLA Committee sought the assistance of the Community Adult Learning Councils (CALCs) in Alberta. The Councils' mandate is to mobilize resources in their communities to offer coordinated, comprehensive, and meaningful courses and projects to meet the learning needs of adults.

The CALCs invited all those in their communities involved in adult learning. Although varying slightly from community to community, the following organizations and individuals were invited to meet with the MLA Committee:

- Members of the business community
- Employer associations
- Local libraries
- School boards
- Post-secondary institutions
- Employment organizations
- Community learning providers
- Chambers of Commerce
- Community consortia
- Students
- Employees
- Volunteers

Additional meetings were arranged between the MLA Committee and labour organizations, business organizations, professional organizations, and individual businesses engaged in employee training. In some instances, the MLA Committee held special meetings with students to hear their experiences first hand. Focus groups in both rural and urban areas were also held with groups of learners such as early school leavers, high school graduates, apprentices and journeymen, post-secondary graduates, immigrants, and seniors.

4. Lifelong Learning

The MLA Committee on Lifelong Learning believes that to encourage Albertans to pursue lifelong learning, it will be helpful to understand what lifelong learning is and why it is important.

What is Lifelong Learning?

Lifelong learning is about learning that begins in early childhood and continues into the senior years. It is about learning how to learn, and acquiring and applying knowledge and skills throughout life. It is about learning to keep up, stay fresh, and have up-to-date skills, while enjoying a high quality of life and being active and responsible citizens.

Lifelong learning takes many forms and occurs in many settings, including:

- formal education offered in schools and post-secondary institutions
- learning on the job site
- literacy and other programs offered through community centres or libraries
- learning in professional organizations or clubs
- learning at home
- a combination of the above.

Lifelong learning can be self-directed or supported by teachers, professors, instructors, employers, co-workers, mentors, family members, and friends.

Why is it Important?

Alberta's knowledge-based economy and society depend on innovative, well-educated, skilled and adaptable people. Lifelong learning is important because it enables Albertans to participate and prosper in this ever-changing knowledge-based economy and society.

All Albertans share in building a lifelong learning culture and community in Alberta. Although many see learning primarily as a way to secure employment, lifelong learning is much more. It is also about understanding the value of learning for personal satisfaction, health and well being, and for being active and responsible citizens.

Lifelong Learning for Adults Returning to Learning

The point at which adults return to learning depends on their credentials and learning needs. Some may return to complete high school, pursue another post-secondary degree or diploma, or take courses for career advancement or general interest. The focus of this report is on ways to help adults return to learning to improve their employment potential and realize their career goals. Adults require flexible options and supports to help them to return to learning.

5. What We Heard

The MLA Committee heard many suggestions from Albertans throughout the consultations. These were reflected in the Committee's "What We Heard" report, released in May 2001, and focused on:

- ensuring that students in the basic learning system are successful in their learning
- ensuring that individuals learn how to learn
- increasing opportunities for adult learning
- strengthening community-based learning
- providing more supports for adult literacy, English as a Second Language and other special learning needs
- developing better cooperation and collaboration among learning providers
- encouraging greater employer support for lifelong learning
- improving standards and certification to better facilitate lifelong learning
- funding lifelong learning
- promoting lifelong learning.

These views were not necessarily raised in all locations or by all participants, given participants' varied knowledge and experiences with the learning system. Some commented generally, while others offered very specific suggestions for the Committee's consideration. This feedback was carefully considered by the MLA Committee in preparing the following recommendations.

6. Committee Recommendations

Albertans recognize that lifelong learning is an investment in the future and that it is important to both personal well being and to society's prosperity. Learning how to learn is foundational to lifelong learning. The Alberta learning system offers a wide range of opportunities for adults to return to learning, making it one of the best systems in the world. Continually enhancing this system will better prepare Albertans for the future.

The MLA Committee offers the following recommendations to help adults return to learning and to strengthen lifelong learning in Alberta.

A Lifelong Learning System

Recommendation 1: Enhance the Flexibility of Learning Opportunities

The Committee recommends that

- ***Government, learning providers and other stakeholders collaborate to better support and enhance learning opportunities to Albertans where and when they need them. This is of particular importance to rural Albertans.***

While many learning providers have programs in place that offer flexible learning opportunities, consultation participants called for a wider range of opportunities. They noted that sometimes learning opportunities are only offered full-time, during the day, in institutional settings in larger centres, and that this limits opportunities for some Albertans to return to learning. Issues regarding training, infrastructure, transportation and distance from learning facilities were raised, as well as the need for more credit courses and distance delivery options with accompanying technical support.

Recommendation 2: Promote a Coordinated Approach to Recognition of Prior Learning and Promote Course/Program Transferability

The Committee recommends that

- ***Alberta Learning work with post-secondary institutions and other learning providers to promote a coordinated approach to recognize prior learning, including the development of new and effective assessment tools.***
- ***Alberta Learning work with learning providers to promote greater course and program transferability, including programming available at the community level.***

Most post-secondary institutions have policy statements on the recognition of prior learning, and they are working on implementation strategies. Additionally, the Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board provides opportunities for individuals to have their prior work experience, knowledge, and skills assessed for certification or for advanced standing in apprenticeship programs. Alberta's International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS) helps immigrants have their educational qualifications compared with Alberta's educational standards. The Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer develops policies, guidelines, and procedures to facilitate transfer agreements among post-secondary institutions.

The Committee encourages greater attention to prior learning to ensure that it is assessed and recognized, where warranted, using consistent practices and procedures. The Committee also believes that a wider range of transferable courses and programs could be promoted to allow for more flexible and affordable learning opportunities.

Recommendation 3: Enhance Community-Based Learning

The Committee recommends that

- ***Alberta Learning encourage collaboration among providers of adult learning, libraries, businesses, and education consortia to ensure that learning opportunities are offered through community learning organizations with community-based instructors.***
- ***Alberta Learning encourage community based learning opportunities.***

Consultation participants suggested that there is a need for greater collaboration among learning providers and other organizations at the community level. The Committee agrees and recommends that post-secondary institutions be encouraged to take advantage of community-based resources to expand the opportunities available. This is particularly important in rural Alberta. Better use might also be made of libraries, schools, community centres, businesses, education consortia, and others, allowing learning to occur in various locations at flexible times.

Consultation participants noted the strength of the CALCs in responding to community learning needs. The Committee agrees that CALCs are effective mechanisms for responding to community learning needs in many communities, particularly those without post-secondary learning providers, and encourages continued support for CALCs.

Programs/Activities to Further Learning

Recommendation 4: Promote Trades as a Career Choice

The Committee recommends that

- ***Industry, learning providers, communities and government enhance their collaboration in promoting the trades as a career choice.***

Many trades require a high level of skill, and journeymen are paid well for these skills. However, the trades are sometimes wrongly perceived as being low-paying and not as highly regarded as occupations requiring a university degree or college diploma.

The Committee notes that the Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board has a three-year Strategic Communications Plan to increase the number of Albertans who see the trades as good careers for themselves and others as a stepping stone to further learning. Enhanced collaboration between industry, learning providers, communities and government to promote careers in the trades would help achieve these goals.

Recommendation 5: Provide More Opportunities for Applied Learning

The Committee recommends that

- ***Learning providers be encouraged to provide more opportunities for applied (hands-on) learning for adults.***

Combining classroom learning with opportunities for practical application (such as cooperative/internship type programs at post-secondary institutions) helps learners learn in ways that are appropriate to them. Some learners are more successful with combined classroom and applied learning opportunities, and find that applied learning supports their employment goals.

Recommendation 6: Encourage Learning Providers to Collaborate for Adult Upgrading Opportunities in Adult Settings

The Committee recommends that

- ***Alberta Learning review the extent to which adults who return to complete high school have no alternative but to take courses in classrooms with high school-aged students and, if necessary, put measures in place to promote adult upgrading courses in adult settings.***
- ***Alberta Learning promote awareness of the need for different teaching strategies to meet adult learners' needs, especially those returning to learning.***

Adults who seek to complete their high school diploma requirements may have particular learning needs and may prefer to return to learning in adult settings. It is sometimes difficult for adults to take their courses with young people in a traditional K-12 classroom. Through collaboration, learning providers can maximize the use of learning institutions by learners of all ages. Teaching strategies for adults returning to learning should also be encouraged to assist successful and continual learning by adults.

Recommendation 7: Improve Adult Literacy

The Committee recommends that

- ***Alberta Learning encourage support for community based adult literacy programming.***
- ***Alberta Learning increase the overall awareness of literacy as the foundational skill for all other learning, including learning that improves employment potential.***

Literacy skills of reading, writing, mathematics, speaking, and listening are key to lifelong learning. Opportunities to improve literacy skills are available in communities

throughout the province through 74 Volunteer Tutor Adult Literacy Programs. These programs recruit and train volunteer literacy tutors, and match them with adult learners.

Family literacy projects encourage parents and children to develop their reading and writing skills together. Funds are available through the Community Programs Family Literacy Project Fund. The Family Literacy Project Fund supports approximately 30 literacy projects annually.

While there are numerous activities in place to support literacy, the Committee believes that more encouragement could be provided to improve adult literacy.

Recommendation 8: Enhance Provision of English as a Second Language Programming

The Committee recommends that

- ***Alberta Learning enhance the provision for English as a Second Language (ESL) programming.***

Albertans who want to learn English as a Second Language have a number of options. Language Assessment and Referral Centres provide English language skills assessments and referrals to adult ESL classes. ESL learners may also be able to receive services from ESL organizations, Volunteer Tutor Adult Literacy Programs, or CALCs.

Learning English as a Second Language is the best way to enable many immigrants to participate in lifelong learning. The Committee notes the federal government role and responsibility in this area. For those involved in offering English as a Second Language Programming, the Committee recommends that particular attention be placed on increasing access for ESL programming for low literacy learners, including providing a range of programming in rural areas where immigrant populations warrant such activities.

Investing in Lifelong Learning

Recommendation 9: Build Confidence for Adults to Pursue Learning

The Committee recommends that

- ***Alberta Learning and learning providers identify ways to assist learners who may lack confidence to return to learning.***

Many Albertans have the confidence to return to learning. Some, however, are not confident that they will be successful. They need encouragement and support through an orientation to learning, a skill or career assessment, or some support to address personal development and life skills. Some supports are best provided at the community level within familiar, informal surroundings.

Recommendation 10: Increase Awareness of Adult Counseling and Career Development Services

The Committee recommends that

- ***Guidance counseling and career development be available to adults on an ongoing basis to support informed decision-making. This includes better communication about current learning opportunities, standards and requirements, and student financial information.***

A wide variety of counseling and guidance services are in place to support adults across the province, including more than 30 career centres operated by Alberta Human Resources and Employment. Some Albertans, however, are not aware of these services or information, and the Committee accordingly recommends government action to improve awareness.

Recommendation 11: Support Funding for Lifelong Learning

The Committee recommends that

- ***Alberta Learning regularly review its student loan eligibility and financial need requirements to reflect current costs of learning.***
- ***Alberta Learning promote a discussion on how to respond to growing interest in part-time learning, including more funding for part-time learners.***
- ***The Government of Alberta work with the federal government to assist learners who want to save money for learning later in life by establishing a RESP-like adult learning account.***

The Committee recognizes that the Government of Alberta offers a wide range of student financial assistance to eligible Alberta learners. In Alberta, the cost of adult education is a shared expense between the student, a spouse or parents, and taxpayers.

The Committee believes that refinements to the student financial assistance system in Alberta should be explored. Particular attention should be placed on the costs of learning (tuition, rent, books, food, utilities, etc.), support for those who wish to pursue part-time learning, and measures to encourage adult Albertans to save for learning.

Encouraging adult learners to return to learning will require innovative approaches. The Committee encourages the Government of Alberta to work with the federal government to help encourage individuals to save for learning, and make lifelong learning a priority.

Recommendation 12: Encourage Government and Employers to Support Lifelong Learning

The Committee recommends that

- ***The Government of Alberta consider providing employer tax credits.***
- ***The Government encourage employers to support their employees in pursuing lifelong learning (e.g., time off, learning in the workplace, funding).***

Employer support for lifelong learning is key to encouraging adults to return to learning. While recognizing that some employers have practices that support lifelong learning, participants suggested that many employers need to strengthen their commitment in this area. Participants suggested that government should encourage professional associations to develop more professional development opportunities for member employees, and that businesses should also be encouraged to provide more on-site learning opportunities.

Consultation participants suggested that employers could provide learning opportunities in the workplace, offer employees time off work to pursue learning, or provide some learning funding incentives or support for employees pursuing learning after work. The Committee believes that measures such as government tax credits could encourage employers to support employee learning.

Recommendation 13: Achieve Effective Use of Technology, Including Learning Technologies

The Committee recommends that

- ***Alberta Learning encourage adult learning providers to adapt learning resources to a technological format that is attractive to learners.***

- ***Alberta Learning work with stakeholders on strategies to support lifelong learning with technology, including infrastructure, training, technical support and public access points.***

Technology can support lifelong learning in a variety of ways, including providing learners with information and communication tools, new sources of information and learning resources, and alternate delivery mechanisms. The Committee recommends that Alberta Learning encourage learning providers to use technology in innovative ways to provide online learning opportunities that stimulate an interest in self learning among

adult learners. However, in order to access services, learners must have access to systems that are compatible.

Alberta's SuperNet is an example of a tool that ensures that all communities have the same opportunities to access high-speed broadband networking at the same cost as in urban settings. The Committee believes that equity of access to technologies should guide policies and strategies.

Promoting Lifelong Learning

Recommendation 14: Encourage Seniors' Participation in Lifelong Learning

The Committee recommends that

- ***Opportunities for seniors to share their learning experiences with other learners be encouraged, including a registry of mentors to help encourage some Albertans to pursue lifelong learning.***

Seniors told the Committee that they want opportunities to participate in lifelong learning, sometimes in formal learning and sometimes in informal learning, in areas of personal interest (such as learning how to use a computer, traveling, personal security, or investments). Some seniors wish to share their knowledge and experiences with younger students or workers. The Committee agrees that this is a valuable resource for Alberta's economy and society and should be explored.

Recommendation 15: Develop a Directory of Learning Opportunities and Supports

The Committee recommends that

- ***The Government of Alberta improve awareness of and access to a single source of information on learning opportunities and supports available to learners.***

The Alberta Learning Information Service (ALIS) website is a provincial gateway to career, learning, and employment information and services. Current information on educational and training programs in Alberta is also compiled by Alberta Human Resources and Employment on EDINFO, a database of programs available through public and private learning providers. Despite the existence of several information sources, it seems that many consultation participants were not aware of them. The Committee recommends that bringing these and other information together as a single source could ensure that Albertans have better access to this information.

Recommendation 16: Develop A Policy Framework for Lifelong Learning

The Committee recommends that

- ***Alberta Learning use the results of these and other consultations to develop a Policy Framework for Lifelong Learning, including a vision, principles, goals, strategies, and outcomes to guide government and learning stakeholders in their support of lifelong learning.***
- ***Performance measures be developed to measure progress toward increasing participation in lifelong learning in Alberta.***

Lifelong learning must be encouraged and supported in a comprehensive and coordinated manner. An overarching policy framework to guide lifelong learning in Alberta would serve to ensure that all types of learning are valued and encouraged.

Recommendation 17: Communicate the Importance of Lifelong Learning

The Committee recommends that

- ***The Government of Alberta launch a marketing campaign promoting the importance of lifelong learning for economic prosperity, quality of life and citizenship.***

Consultation participants agreed with the importance of lifelong learning and that learners, learning providers, employers, workers, parents, governments, and communities should work together to expand opportunities and participation. The Committee agrees that all forms of learning are valuable, whether they are life skill courses, post-secondary programs, certificate programs, or community based arts and recreation courses.

Other Comments Related to Lifelong Learning

The Committee heard other excellent comments and suggestions through the consultations. While these comments and suggestions relate to basic education and are outside the Committee's mandate for adult learning, they support the pursuit of lifelong learning and are thus provided to Alberta Learning.

Encourage High School Completion

All Albertans should be encouraged to complete high school and be granted certification upon completion, such as school leaving certificates, to qualify learners in adult, career and special education programs.

High school completion is a foundation for lifelong learning. The Committee agrees with consultation participants that successful high school completion is important to removing barriers to work and further learning. It is important that all learners be given recognition for their achievement (e.g. school leaving certificates), which would allow for smoother transitions to work and further learning

Provide More Career Counselling to Students

More career counseling services to students at the junior and senior high school levels should be available throughout the province.

Junior and senior high school counselors play a key role in student career counseling. However, consultation participants suggested that some students complete high school not knowing about career options, and they lack basic employability and life skills. It is recognized that some students may need more help to make successful transitions from high school to further learning or work.

Promote Early Literacy

The benefits of early literacy and oral language development should be better promoted.

The importance of early literacy initiatives needs to be recognized. There is a strong relationship between a learner's success in early literacy and his or her success in later learning. Identifying and assisting students with their literacy skills in the early years prepares them for lifelong learning. Students experiencing difficulty in reading at an early age can obtain assistance in the Early Literacy Initiative.

Ensure the K-12 Curriculum Supports the Importance of Lifelong Learning

The importance of learning throughout life should be reinforced and be a component of all courses in the K-12 school system.

The development of the capacity to pursue learning throughout life is a key outcome of the basic education system in Alberta. Understanding the value of lifelong learning is essential to creating a lifelong learning culture. The Committee believes that reinforcing the importance of lifelong learning throughout the basic lifelong learning system will encourage learners to pursue learning throughout their lives.

7. Concluding Comments

The MLA Committee on Lifelong Learning believes that these recommendations will help improve opportunities for adults to return to learning to improve their employment potential and realize their career goals. They will also help Albertans to understand the importance of lifelong learning. The recommendations support building a lifelong learning culture and community for economic prosperity, quality of life and citizenship. Albertans must be ready for a future where they have the education, skills, and knowledge to take advantage of the opportunities of the knowledge-based economy and society. The recommendations in the preceding pages are conveyed to the Minister of Learning for his consideration.